

**SEPARATION OF ONE OR MORE FETAL HEART COMPONENT SIGNALS  
FROM HEART SIGNAL INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM A PREGNANT  
FEMALE**

**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION**

5           This application claims the priority of U.S. provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/516,343 (by Graupe, et al., filed October 31, 2003, and entitled "SEPARATION OF ONE OR MORE FETAL HEART COMPONENT SIGNALS FROM HEART SIGNAL INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM A PREGNANT FEMALE").

**TECHNICAL FIELD**

10           The invention relates generally to the medical arts and more particularly to heart signal information.

**BACKGROUND**

15           Doctors today employ one or more heart signal machines to make a determination of one or more fetal heart component signals. The heart signal machine obtains heart signal information from a pregnant mother. The heart signal machine in one example comprises one or more processor components. The heart signal machine employs the processor components to make a determination of the fetal heart component signal based on the heart signal information.

20           In one example, the heart signal machine comprises an ultrasound machine. The ultrasound machine in one example allows the doctor to view heart muscle movement of the fetus. For example, the doctor infers the fetal heart component signal from the heart muscle movement. One shortcoming of an employment of the ultrasound machine to infer the fetal heart component signal is that the heart component signal is not a measurement of the electrical activity of fetal heart muscle movement. For example, the doctor could only  
25           diagnose major defects of the fetal heart through employment of the ultrasound machine.

In another example, the heart signal machine comprises a magnetocardiogram ("MCA") machine and the heart signal information comprises magnetic heart signal information. The magnetocardiogram machine in one example employs one or more magnets to obtain the magnetic heart signal information from the pregnant mother. The processor  
5 component of the magnetocardiogram machine employs the magnetic heart signal information to make a determination of the fetal heart component signal. One shortcoming of an employment of the magnetocardiogram machine to make the determination of the fetal heart component signal is that the magnetocardiogram machine is expensive.

In yet another example, the heart signal machine comprises an electrocardiogram  
10 ("ECG") machine and the heart signal information comprise electrical heart signal information. The electrocardiogram machine in one example employs one or more electrodes to obtain the electrical heart signal information from the pregnant mother. Diagnostic information can best be obtained from a fetal electrocardiogram. However access to that fetal electrocardiogram in a noninvasive manner is not available early in the pregnancy. The  
15 fetus' electrocardiogram is extremely weak early in the pregnancy. Not only is the fetus' electrocardiogram extremely weak in relation to the maternal electrocardiogram in which it is embedded, but it is also weak in relation to the various noises picked up by the electrocardiogram electrodes. The noises are partly due to electromyographic ("EMG") activity picked up by these electrodes, especially when the electrodes are placed on the  
20 mother's abdomen or lower back.

The processor component of the electrocardiogram machine in one example employs independent component analysis ("ICA") to separate the fetal electrical heart component signal from the electrical heart signal information. One shortcoming of an employment of the electrocardiogram machine to determine the fetal electrical heart component signal is that the  
25 fetal electrical heart component signal can have an amplitude that is 1/2,000 of the amplitude

of a maternal electrical heart component signal in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. Furthermore, the electrocardiogram machine cannot separate very weak fetal heart signals, such as fetal heart signals early in the pregnancy at the 12<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> gestation week. The fetal electrical heart component signal in one example is embedded in noise that has a greater amplitude than the fetal electrical heart component signal. Thus, the noise makes it difficult to accurately determine the fetal electrical heart component signal in a noninvasive manner. The electrocardiogram machine alone cannot separate a major portion of the noise component signal from the fetal electrical heart component signal. Thus, the doctor is unable to diagnose one or more fetal heart defects early enough into the pregnancy to treat the fetal heart defects.

The fetal electrocardiogram separation problem is complicated by the fact that the noise in each electrocardiogram recording channel is different from that in the other channels. Classic singular value decomposition type (including independent component analysis based) separation methods must assume that the number of incoming signals (channels) is smaller or equal to the number of uncorrelated or independent sources that form the incoming sources. However, this is not the case in the fetal electrocardiogram separation problem due to the different statistics of the noises in the various channels. Hence, if there were one noise common to all electrodes in a three channel situation, then the number of source signals considered in the fetal electrocardiogram separation problem would have been three, namely, fetal electrocardiogram, maternal electrocardiogram, and noise. However, in reality there are five sources in the three channel fetal electrocardiogram separation problem. The five sources are the fetal electrocardiogram, the maternal electrocardiogram, and three noises of different statistics. For example, each channel has a separate noise signal. This mixture cannot be separated by classical separation algorithms of any type unless all three noises are of considerably lower signal-power than the fetal electrocardiogram signal power. However,

early in a pregnancy, the three noises are not of considerably lower signal-power than the fetal electrocardiogram signal power.

Thus, a need exists for a heart signal machine that can separate a fetal heart component signal from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female.

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### SUMMARY

The invention in one implementation encompasses a method. One or more fetal heart component signals are separated from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female based on singular value decomposition.

Another implementation of the invention encompasses an apparatus. The apparatus  
10 comprises one or more processor components that separate one or more fetal heart component signals from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female based on singular value decomposition.

Yet another implementation of the invention encompasses an article. The article comprises: one or more computer-readable signal-bearing media; and means in the one or  
15 more media for separating one or more fetal heart component signals from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female based on singular value decomposition.

Still yet another implementation of the invention encompasses a method. One or more filters are employed to extract one or more fetal heart component signals from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female. The one or more fetal heart component  
20 signals are separated from the heart signal information based on independent component analysis. One or more blind adaptive filtering components are employed to reduce noise in the one or more fetal heart component signals.

A further implementation of the invention encompasses an apparatus. The apparatus comprises one or more processor components that cause one or more filters to extract one or  
25 more fetal heart component signals from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant

female. A first one or more of the one or more processor components separate the one or more fetal heart component signals from the heart signal information based on independent component analysis. A second one or more of the one or more processor components employ one or more blind adaptive filtering components to reduce noise in the one or more fetal heart component signals.

Another implementation of the invention encompasses an article. The article comprises: one or more computer-readable signal-bearing media; means in the one or more media for employing one or more filters to extract one or more fetal heart component signals from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female; means in the one or more media for separating the one or more fetal heart component signals from the heart signal information based on independent component analysis; and means in the one or more media for employing a cepstral analysis to reduce noise in the one or more fetal heart component signals.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

Features of exemplary implementations of the invention will become apparent from the description, the claims, and the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a representation of one exemplary implementation of an apparatus that comprises a heart signal machine, a plurality of electrode pairs, one or more processor components, one or more analog-to-digital converters, one or more filters, one or more separator components, and one or more post filters, wherein the plurality of electrode pairs comprise a plurality of an abdominal electrode pair and a chest electrode pair.

FIG. 2 is a representation of another exemplary implementation of the apparatus of FIG. 1, wherein the plurality of electrode pairs comprise an abdominal electrode pair, a chest electrode pair, and a thoracic electrode pair.

FIG. 3 is one exemplary implementation of the filter of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is one exemplary implementation of the separator component of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 5 is one exemplary implementation of the post filter of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

5 FIG. 6 is a representation of an exemplary plot of heart signal information obtained through a first channel of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 7 is a representation of an exemplary plot of heart signal information obtained through a second channel of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

10 FIG. 8 is a representation of an exemplary plot of heart signal information obtained through a third channel of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 9 is a representation of one exemplary plot of a maternal heart component signal obtained through employment of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 10 is a representation of another exemplary plot of a maternal heart component signal obtained through employment of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

15 FIG. 11 is a representation of an exemplary plot of a fetal heart component signal obtained through employment of the heart signal machine of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 12 is a representation of an iterative version of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

### **DETAILED DESCRIPTION**

Referring to the BACKGROUND section above, to overcome the difficulties of fetal  
20 ECG separation, a singular value decomposition based separation sub-system is combined with a noise-reduction sub-system for an approach based on blind adaptive filtering. Exemplary techniques for performing blind adaptive filtering are disclosed in D. Graupe and D. Veselinovic, Blind Adaptive Filtering of Speech from Unknown Noise of Unknown

Spectrum Using a Virtual Feedback Configuration, IEEE Transactions on Speech and Audio Processing, Vol. 8, No. 2, March 2000, pp. 146-158; or in D. Veselinovic and D. Graupe, A Wavelet Transform Approach to Blind Adaptive Filtering of Speech from Unknown Noises, IEEE Transactions on Circuits & Systems – Part II, Vol. 50, No. 3, March 2003, pp. 150-154; or in Chapters 11 and 12 of D. Graupe, Time Series Analysis, Identification and Adaptive Filtering, Kreiger Publishing Co., Melbourne, FL, 1984, second revised edition, 1989; or by cepstral filtering methods that employ a Fourier transform of a nonlinear function of another Fourier transform; or in A. Oppenheim and R. Schaffer, Digital Signal Processing, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1975, pp 500-507.

In one example, one or more fetal heart component signals are separated from heart signal information obtained from a pregnant female based on singular value decomposition. A further example incorporates filtering components, based on nonlinear blind adaptive filtering methods, to reduce the effects of measurement noises that otherwise preclude adequate retrieval of the fetal heart information early in the pregnancy when measurement noises are high in relation to the fetal heart signal.

Turning to FIGS. 1-2, an apparatus 100 in one example comprises a plurality of components such as computer software and/or hardware components. A number of such components can be combined or divided in the apparatus 100. An exemplary component of the apparatus 100 employs and/or comprises a set and/or series of computer instructions written in or implemented with any of a number of programming languages, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art.

The apparatus 100 in one example comprises a heart signal machine 102, one or more electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108, one or more processor components 110, one or more analog-to-digital converters 112, one or more filters 114, one or more separator components 116, and one or more post filters 118. A vector channel runs between the analog-to-digital

converter 112 and the filters 114, between the filters 114 and the separator component 116, and between the separator component 116 and the post filters 118.

The heart signal machine 102 obtains heart signal information from a pregnant woman 120. The processor component 110 in one example, as in FIG. 2, employs one or more electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108 (e.g.,  $e_1$ ,  $e_2$ ,  $e_i$ , and  $e_{i+1}$ ) to record the heart signal information from the pregnant woman 120. The processor component 110 in one example employs one or more of the analog-to-digital converter 112, the filter 114, the separator component 116, and the post filter 118 to separate one or more fetal heart component signals from the heart signal information. For example, the processor component 110 can separate the fetal heart component signals that have an amplitude as low as 1/2,000 of the amplitude of the non-fetal heart component signals and as early as 12 weeks into the pregnancy of the pregnant mother 120.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 6-11, the heart signal machine 102 in one example employs one or more of the electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108 and the processor component 110 to output to a doctor the heart signal information of one or more fetuses of the pregnant woman 120. The electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108 capture raw heart signal data, such as the raw heart signal data 602, 702 and 802 of FIGS. 6-8. The raw heart signal data 602, 702, and 802 in one example comprise mixtures of a fetal heart component signal, a maternal heart component signal, and a mixture of several noise component signals from the various electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108. The heart signal machine 102 receives the raw heart signal data 602, 702 and 802 and in one example separates the mixed signal components to output a first maternal heart signal 902, a second maternal heart signal 1002, and a fetal heart signal 1102, as shown in FIGS. 9-11.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 12, the heart signal machine 102 comprises an instance of a recordable data storage medium 122. In one example, the heart signal machine 102



comprises an electrocardiogram ("ECG") machine. For example, where the heart signal information comprises a plurality of electrocardiogram signals, the heart signal machine 102 outputs one or more electrocardiogram signals. In another example, the heart signal machine 102 comprises a magnetocardiogram ("MCG") machine. For example, where the heart signal  
5 information comprises a plurality of magnetocardiogram signals, the heart signal machine 102 outputs one or more magnetocardiogram signals. FIG. 1 illustrates a first separation approach and FIG. 12 illustrates a realization of the apparatus 100 where components are cascaded one or more times to perform an iterative separation.

In FIG. 12, the functionality of the separator component 116 and the post filter 118  
10 are combined into a series of iterative separators 1202, 1204, and 1206. A set of estimated separation signals is passed through the series of iterative separators 1202, 1204, and 1206. Each estimated separation signal of one separation iteration is cross-correlated with each other estimated separation signal of the one separation iteration after each separation iteration. An absolute value of the cross-correlations is evaluated at each iteration and the  
15 outcome of the multi-step iterative separator is output once a maximal absolute value of the cross correlations is below a pre-determined threshold value. Alternatively, the outcome of the multi-step iterative separator may be output once a sum of absolute values of the cross correlations is below a pre-determined threshold value.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 2, the heart signal machine 102 comprises one or more of an  
20 amplifier component 103, a display component 104, the processor component 110, the analog-to-digital converter 112, the filter 114, the separator component 116, and the post filter 118. In one example, the processor component 110, the analog-to-digital converter 112, the filter 114, the separator component 116, and the post filter 118 connect to the heart signal machine 102 through one or more signal cables, as shown in FIG. 1. In another example, the  
25 processor component 110, the analog-to-digital converter 112, the filter 114, the separator

component 116, and the post filter 118 are integrated into the heart signal machine 102, as shown in FIG. 2. For example, the processor component 110 in FIG. 2 is an integral part of the heart signal machine 102.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 6-11, after separation of the first maternal heart signal 902, the second maternal heart signal 1002, and the fetal heart signal 1102 from the raw heart signal data 602, 702 and 802, the display component 104 may output one or more of the fetal heart component signal 1102, and/or the first and second maternal heart component signals 902 and 1002. The processor component 110 in one example sends the fetal heart component signal 1102 from the output of the post filter 118 to the display component 104 to display the fetal heart component signal to the doctor. The doctor employs the display component 104 of the heart signal machine 102 to choose to view the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart component signal, or the noise component signals.

Referring to FIGS. 1-2, the electrode pairs 106, 107, 108 connect with the heart signal machine 102 and/or the processor component 110. The processor component 110 in one example employs the electrode pairs 106, 107, 108 to obtain the heart signal information from the pregnant mother 120. The electrode pairs 106, 107, 108 comprise a ground component signal and measurement component signal. The electrode pair 106 in one example comprises a chest electrode pair. The electrode pair 107 in one example comprises an abdominal electrode pair. The electrode pair 108 in one example comprises a thoracic electrode pair. The processor component 110 employs at least three total electrode pairs of the electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108 to obtain the heart signal information. In one example, the processor component 110 obtains the heart signal information from one or more of the electrode pairs 106 and two or more of the electrode pairs 107. For example in FIG. 1, the processor component 110 does not obtain the heart signal information from the electrode pair

108. In another example, the processor component 110 employs eight to ten total electrode pairs of the electrode pairs 106, 107, and 108 to obtain the heart signal information.

The processor component 110 in one example employs one or more of the analog-to-digital converter 112, the filters 114, the separator component 116, and the post filter 118 to  
5 separate the fetal heart component signal from the heart signal information. The processor component 110 in one example passes the heart signal information from the electrodes 106, 107, and 108 to the analog-to-digital converter 112.

The analog-to-digital converter 112 in one example receives the heart signal information from the processor component 110. For example, the processor component 110  
10 employs the analog-to-digital converter 112 to digitize the heart signal information. The analog-to-digital converter 112 in one example outputs a vector of the plurality of signals [X\*] based on the heart signal information to the processor component 110 or the filters 114.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 3, the filters 114 in one example receive the heart signal information or the vector of the plurality of signals from the processor component 110 or the  
15 analog-to-digital converter 112. The processor component 110 in one example employs the filters 114 to re-process the heart signal information prior to its separation in separator component 116 of FIG. 1. In one example, the filter component 114 comprises of a cascade of linear and nonlinear filters, as shown in FIG. 3. Filter 301 comprises a linear filter that serves in one example to remove power-main-line interference from the heart signal  
20 information. For example, the filter 301 comprises one or more notch (band-stop) filters 302 followed by low-pass linear filter 303 for frequencies that lie above the frequency spectrum of electrocardiogram signals, including any fetal electrocardiogram signals. The output of filter 301 is input into filter 304 which removes long-term variations (non-stationarities) in the mean of each of the long-term signals. The filter 304 in one example comprises a high  
25 pass filter with a cut-off frequency that is one-third or less of the average frequency of a

maternal heart rate to remove effects of time-variations in a long term mean of the heart signal information between maternal heart beats. The filter 304 may employ one or more stages of differencing to remove effects of time-variations in the long term mean of the heart signal information between maternal heart beats.

- 5 In one example, the output of filter 304 is input into nonlinear filter 305 to reduce excessive high amplitude peaks from the incoming heart signals. First, the filter 305 raises the heart signal to a power greater than one (i.e.,  $p > 1$ ). Second, the filter 305 reduces the peaks of the power-raised signal that exceeded the predetermined threshold value. Third, the filter 305 raises the signal of reduced peaks to an inverse of the power (i.e.,  $1/p$ ). The filter
- 10 305 preserves the signs of the signals received at the input of filter 305.

- Referring to FIGS. 1 and 4, upon receipt of the output from the filters 114, the processor component 110 in one example employs the one or more separator components 116 to perform a separation 402 of the second portion of the vector of the plurality of signals into [S]: the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart component signal, and the noise
- 15 component signals. For example, the separation 402 is based on singular value decomposition ("SVD"), as shown in FIG. 4. In one example, the separator component 116 in one example employs an AMUSE-based algorithm to perform singular value decomposition for the blind separation 402.

- In one example, base techniques for performing the AMUSE-based algorithm are
- 20 disclosed in Tong, L., Liu, R.W., Soon, V.C. and Huang, Y., 1991, Indeterminacy and Identifiability of Blind Identification, IEEE Transactions On Circuits and Systems, Vol. 38, No. 5, May 1991, pp. 499-509. In another example, techniques for performing the AMUSE-based algorithm are based on a variation where the delay parameter involved in the AMUSE-based algorithm is computed to minimize cross-correlations between output components,
- 25 while avoiding removal of low eigenvalues in contrast to the previous version of the

separator. An exemplary technique for performing the variation is disclosed in Suliga, P. and Graupe, D., A Neural Network Approach to Blind Separation of Mixed Signals, Smart Engineering Systems Design, Vol. 12, ASME Press, NY, 2002, pp. 689-694.

In another example, the separator component 116 employs a neural network algorithm to perform singular value decomposition for the separation 402. An exemplary technique for performing the neural network algorithm is disclosed in Suliga, P. and Graupe, D., A Neural Network Approach to Blind Separation of Mixed Signals, Smart Engineering Systems Design, Vol. 12, ASME Press, NY, 2002, pp. 689-694. The separator component 116 in one example employs a singular value decomposition related approach using independent component analysis to make a determination of a blind separator for blind separation analysis. For example, the separator component 116 performs blind separation analysis to separate the second portion of the vector of the plurality of signals into the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart component signal, and the noise component signals. The noise component signals in one example are not correlated with the fetal heart component signal or with the maternal heart component signal. The separator component 116 passes the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart component signal, and the noise component signals to one or more of the processor component 110 and the post filter 118.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 5, upon receipt of the outputs from the separator component 116, the processor component 110 employs the post filter 118 to reduce one or more of the remnant noise components and the maternal heart signal components from the fetal heart component signal. The remnant noise components in one example comprise colored and/or white noise components.

The post filter 118 in one example employs a cepstral component 502 to reduce the remnant noise components from the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart

component signal, and the noise component signal as received from the output of the separator component 116, thus serving as a cepstral-based blind adaptive filter. The cepstral component 502 in one example performs a first cepstral transform function on the fetal heart component signal, the maternal heart component signal, and the noise component signals.

5        In one example, the cepstral component 502 estimates which of the outputs from the separator component 116 is most closely correlated with the signal from the maternal chest electrode pair. Then, the cepstral component 502 reduces the effect of the cepstral transformation of the estimated maternal signal on the cepstral transformations of the other signals coming from the separator component 116. For example, the cepstral component 502  
10   passes its outputs through a cepstral filter 504. Subsequently, the post filter 118 performs an inverse cepstral transformation 506 on the output of the cepstral filter 504. In another example, the cepstral component 502 performs a cepstral transformation on the signal from the maternal chest electrode pair at the output of the filters 114 and employs this transformation as being the closest to the actual maternal signal component in its filtering  
15   operation. In yet another example, the cepstral-based post-filtering component 502 considers prior knowledge on cepstral analysis of electrocardiogram signals relating to fetal electrocardiograms.

      In another example, the post filter 118 may perform wavelet filtering of the signals from the separator component 116. Subsequently, the post filter 118 reduces the effect of the  
20   wavelet transform of the signal component that is closest to the maternal heart signal. For example, the post-filtering component 502 compares the cross-correlations with the maternal chest signal on the wavelet transform of the other signals coming from the filters 114. The post-filtering component 502 reduces the effect of this wavelet transform in the wavelet transformations of the other signals input to the post-filtering component 502 and then  
25   inverse wavelet transforms the resultant wavelet transformations, such that it serves as a blind

adaptive filter. In another example of using a wavelet transform filter in the post-filtering component 502, the wavelet transform of the heart signal component that relates to the maternal chest electrode pair, as output from filters 114 is employed as that of the wavelet transform of the maternal heart signal.

5 In yet another example, the post filter 118 uses frequency domain blind adaptive filtering ("BAF") to reduce the effects of maternal heart signals and of noise on the fetal heart signal. An exemplary technique for performing frequency domain blind adaptive filtering is disclosed in D. Graupe and D. Veselinovic, Blind Adaptive Filtering of Speech from Unknown Noise of Unknown Spectrum Using a Virtual Feedback Configuration, IEEE  
10 Transactions on Speech and Audio Processing, Vol. 8, No. 2, March 2000, pp. 146-158. In one example, as part of its blind adaptive filtering algorithm, the blind adaptive filter employs identified parameters, but when employing parameters identified from the maternal heart signal related to the output of the filter component 114 and parameters are available from prior information on echocardiogram signals in general, the prior parameters are employed by  
15 the blind adaptive filter.

Other examples of the post filter 118 comprise a Wiener and Kalman filters. The Wiener and Kalman filters may serve as the filtering algorithm in the blind adaptive filter. Exemplary techniques for performing Wiener and Kalman filters are disclosed in Chapters 11 and 12 of D. Graupe, Time Series Analysis, Identification and Adaptive Filtering, Kreiger  
20 Publishing Co., Melbourne, FL, 1984, second revised edition, 1989

Upon receipt of the reduced-noise fetal heart component signal, the reduced-noise maternal heart component signal, and the noise component signals, the processor component 110 passes the reduced-noise fetal heart component signal, the reduced-noise maternal heart component signal, and the noise component signals to the display component 104 of the heart  
25 signal machine 102. The doctor in one example is able to view on the display component 104

the fetal heart component signal to make a determination of the health of the heart of the fetus. For example, the doctor can employ the determination of the health to diagnose and/or treat one or more heart defects of the fetus as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> week into the pregnancy of the pregnant woman 120 through employment of the heart signal machine 102.

5       The apparatus 100 in one example employs one or more computer-readable signal-bearing medium. Examples of a computer-readable signal-bearing medium for the apparatus 100 comprise the recordable data storage medium 122 of the heart signal machine 102 and the processor component 110. For example, the recordable data storage medium for the apparatus 100 comprises one or more of a magnetic, electrical, optical, biological, and  
10   atomic data storage medium. In one example, the computer-readable signal-bearing medium comprises a modulated carrier signal transmitted over a network comprising or coupled with the apparatus 100, for instance, one or more of a telephone network, a local area network ("LAN"), the internet, and a wireless network.

      The steps or operations described herein are just exemplary. There may be many  
15   variations to these steps or operations without departing from the spirit of the invention. For instance, the steps may be performed in a differing order, or steps may be added, deleted, or modified.

      Although exemplary implementations of the invention have been depicted and described in detail herein, it will be apparent to those skilled in the relevant art that various  
20   modifications, additions, substitutions, and the like can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention and these are therefore considered to be within the scope of the invention as defined in the following claims.